

Erik Fritzsche's Checklist

Dealing with the Reputation Dilemma in Political Statements

In an increasingly polarized society, companies face the challenge of deciding whether and how to express themselves on political or social issues. Taking a stand often appears authentic and conveys values, but communicating a stance also carries risks—ranging from customer and reputation losses to internal tensions. However, remaining silent is not always the safer option, as target audiences also "hear" and interpret silence. As communication theorist Paul Watzlawick famously stated, "One cannot not communicate!" The following checklist helps businesses assess whether taking a position is appropriate, what risks exist, and how to communicate credibly—enabling them to fulfill their democratic responsibility without taking hasty or uncalculated reputational risks.

One cannot not communicate! – Paul Watzlawick

Figure 1: The Reputation Dilemma in Political Statements of Corporates



1. Strategic Consideration: Is a Public Statement Necessary?

- Does the topic align with the company's identity and values?
- Is there a direct connection to business practices, products, or services?
- Have the potential impacts on stakeholders been analyzed?
- Is the statement a **values-based position** or an **interest-based position**?
(Values refer to "desirable states" independent of business interests.)

2. Differentiation: Defining the Nature of the Statement

- Does the position address **extremist attacks on democracy** (e.g., human dignity, racism, sexism, attacks on free speech, equality, elections, federalism, the rule of law)? Is this distinction clearly understood?
- Is the position a **controversial but democratic opinion** that is permissible within public debate?
- Has the difference between extremist and democratic opinions been identified and communicated correctly?

3. Risk Analysis: Assessing Potential Consequences

- Could the position alienate customers or business partners?
- Could it lead to internal tensions or employee resistance?
- Is there a risk of being perceived as partisan or opportunistic in current political debates?
- Is the position formulated in a way that avoids black-and-white thinking?
- Is there a readiness to accept unpopular opinions and foster democratic discourse?

4. Ensuring Authenticity & Credibility

- Does the statement align with the company's past actions?
- Are there solid facts and arguments to support the position?
- Is the company prepared to stand by this position in the long term?
- Does the statement emphasize that democracy protects **freedom of speech** while also setting clear boundaries against extremism?
- Is an **open discussion culture** being promoted rather than bans or moral absolutism?
- Is there a willingness to reconsider the position based on informed discussion?

5. Defining a Communication Strategy

- Is the message clear, logical, and consistent?
- Is there a strategy in place to handle critical reactions?
- Have the appropriate communication channels been identified? (Social media, press, internal communication)

- Is the company prepared to respond quickly and professionally in crisis situations?
- Is reflexive exclusion avoided in favor of fostering debate?
- Are strong arguments presented instead of merely distancing from opposing views—especially on **controversial but non-extremist** opinions?
- Are potential reputational risks anticipated? Are there countermeasures in place? If not, is the reputational risk worth taking for the sake of values or interests?

6. Handling Controversial but Non-Extremist Opinions

- Is it recognized that **diverse opinions are a challenge inherent to democracy**?
- Is the focus on **dialogue and exchange** rather than bans or moral judgment?
- Is criticism of differing opinions formulated in a way that fosters debate rather than stifles it?
- Are questions used to explore arguments rather than making hasty judgments?
- Is it made clear that disagreement with an opinion does not mean it should be banned?

7. Handling Extremist Positions

- Are the boundaries between **freedom of speech and extremism** clearly defined?
- Are clear limits set on positions that undermine democracy?
- Is the mistake of labeling every unpopular opinion as extremist avoided?
- Is it transparently communicated why certain positions are incompatible with democratic principles?
- Is engagement limited to situations where meaningful discussion is possible, or are unproductive debates avoided?

8. Implementation & Monitoring

- Who within the company is responsible for communication? (CEO, PR department, external consultants)
- How are reactions to the statement being monitored and analyzed?
- Is there a crisis management plan for critical situations?
- Is there an exit strategy in case the statement leads to unexpected negative consequences?

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